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# The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson

*Reduced to an eye*

*I forget what*

*I*

*was.*

—Denise Levertov,

"The Cold Spring"

One of the most common methods of approaching the specificity of post-World War II American independent film has been the invocation of poetry as an analogy. The distinction between the "poetic" independent film and the "prosaic" feature film has been used to justify the former's density, its difficulty, and its rejection of illusionist narrative as well as to valorize it as uncommercial and by that a purer art. P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) is only the most substantial and impressive contribution to a body of theory which goes back to the recruitment of formal models of poetic film from the French surrealists and the discussion of this and related issues at the Cinema 16 symposium, "Poetry and the Film," in 1953. At those sessions, Parker Tyler emphasized a "surrealist poetry of the image" in his list of "the types of poetical expression that do appear in films today."<sup>1</sup> Maya Deren, whose own work was already an important influence on the emerging independent movement, attempted to be more restrictive, arguing that the "poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a 'vertical' investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment" as distinct from the "horizontal" construction of the drama. When she was driven to recognize that her distinction between vertical and horizontal boiled down to a distinction between lyric and narrative, the specificity of a poetic cinema as involving elaborations or intensifications of a series of isolated moments as against the continuously unfolding action of the feature (metaphor against metonymy, paradigm against syntagm) became clear and in fact remained a dominant point of reference.

Deren's argument is idealist, both in its attempt to abstract a transhistorical essence of poetry and to phrase that essence in formal terms, and consequently all that she and her successors could do was reproduce the poetics dominant at the time, the modernist moment of Romanticism. References to Eliot and Pound littered the symposium and would continue to appear in subsequent theorizing through Sitney's book. It is not my purpose here to dispute the overall analogy with poetry and, in this case, the work of Brakhage but rather to re-argue it in materialist terms—and then suggest that the most appropriate formal analogy for Brakhage is not Pound and Eliot but the development of the Pound tradition in its post-modernist phase, specifically the work of Charles Olson. Finally I will draw attention to several works by Brakhage in which that aesthetic confronts its own limitations.

The parallels between Brakhage and the Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth, are clear and Sitney's decision "to trace the heritage of Romanticism"<sup>2</sup> (rather than to use Freudian hermeneutics or sexual analyses) in his essay on American independent film moved critical discussion to a new level. But like the work of his mentors—Hartman, de Man and especially Harold Bloom—Sitney's account is incomplete to the extent that it is limited to the stylistic and epistemological levels.<sup>3</sup> In formulating his models, Bloom omitted reference to the emergence of industrial capitalism and to the consequent changes in the social location of the artist which produced the formal conditions of High Romanticism and its characteristic philosophical concerns. A similar hermeticism in Sitney allows him to present the development of independent film from the sixties to the seventies as an autonomous evolution in art itself rather than a determinate historical production. The appropriateness of the analogy between the Romantic poet and the sixties independent film-maker is not simply a matter of parallels in epistemological con-

cerns so much as a continuity in the situation of the artist in industrial capitalism, a situation which, while it conditions all cultural production in this period, is more thoroughly fulfilled in the case of the poet and in the case of some independent film-makers in the fifties and sixties.

The new concerns of the Romantic poets (notably the investigation of the imagination as the mediator between consciousness and nature and the eventual apotheosis of it as the location of all spiritual, ethical and finally social values) marked a profound shift from Neoclassic esthetics with their more overtly didactic and social orientation, themselves reproduced as stylistic forms embodying social values—the order, harmony and decorum of the heroic couplet being exemplary. This development may be traced to the more profound shift in the social location of the poet.<sup>4</sup> For it is at this point that alienation in its modern form began to dominate both social and intellectual life as simultaneously the poet was displaced from a corroborative social environment (the local community—village, coffee-house, or court) to confront the commodification of his work, now obliged to take its place as one item among many in a competitive market place. This social dislocation, compounded by the difficulty of sustaining utopian republican aspirations after the failure of the revolutionary movements throughout Europe, precipitated the artist into the scrutiny of his own consciousness and allowed him to elevate the drama of that scrutiny into an end in itself, the proper function of art. Where it continued to be possible to envisage social effectiveness of a more general kind (as, notably, in Blake and Shelley) this was supposed to follow as an implication of the renovation of the individual imagination in the experience of art.

Though modified in various ways and dressed up in different clothes, this situation endured through the liberal tradition and in fact allowed that tradition its characteristic critical posture against the dehumanization of capitalism and its consistent attempts to industrialize the mind. By the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century the model with its mutually ratifying presuppositions as to the centrality of the imagination and the primacy of the individual creative act had been so thoroughly internalized that it appeared as a condition of nature itself and became invisible as

ideology. So total was the process of naturalization that even those Modernist writers who most vehemently attacked the Romantic tradition (such as Pound and Eliot) ended only by reproducing it in the way they thought of the artist's possible social role.

What has been said is, *mutatis mutandis*, true of art in all media since the late eighteenth century, but the rigors and the contradictions of the model are especially intense in the case of poetry since it proved progressively more difficult to integrate this medium into either the mercantile processes of capitalism or its attendant social rituals. Whereas painting could easily be recast as real estate, music and theater as social bonding, and fiction as consumer recreation, poetry remained intractable and unincorporated. The intense inwardness of postwar American poetry, reaching its apogee in the "confessional" investigation of private neurosis, was a function of sensibility adrift without either recourse to a public language or certainty of an audience, the former having seeped away in the jargon of Cold War propaganda and its mother dialect, the advertising industry, with the latter almost entirely conditioned by the mass arts of the communications industry.

This situation, in which economic marginality mirrored massive social irrelevance, was exactly that faced by any independent filmmaker who understood his or her work as art, as an end sufficient in itself rather than (as in Cassavetes's case) as a means of entry into the studio production system. Apart from a few scattered and isolated projects (the work of Florey, Watson and Webber, and Richter for example), there was no tradition of independent production in the United States, and so no previously theorized role for it. The innovation of a role for the film-maker as an artist—as, most crucially, a poet—then had both theoretical and practical components. It involved the conceptualization of the film-maker as an *individual* artist (itself made possible by the creation of a tradition of such out of previous film history) and it involved the innovation of a working situation, a means of production and distribution, alternative to the technology and labor practices of Hollywood. In none of these areas was Brakhage entirely unique or original; his singular importance derives from the extremes to which he pushed in each case and by the way in which he was

able to theorize them jointly so that a given development in any one area became a concomitant of all the others. They come together in the evolution of a film practice in which artisanal, domestic production is the material form of a theory of film as an entirely personal activity which, like Romantic poetry, originates from a context that is at once biological and quasi-metaphysical.

By the time Brakhage made his first film (*Interim*, 1952), film poetry as a stylistic category was already established and three years later he had become so identified with it that Jonas Mekas could write that his work seemed "to be the best expression of all the virtues and sins of the American film poem today."<sup>5</sup> As mentioned, that category had been derived from the formal practices of the surrealists, recognition of which supplied the structural motifs of Brakhage's early work (what Sitney calls the "trance" film) and also the early stylistic traits, especially the use of metaphor by which the narrative was retarded, thus opening the way for elaboration of an image or a group of images.<sup>6</sup> The conceptualization of the surrealist cinema as poetic was however only the beginning of a re-reading of film history in terms derived from it (i.e., as the personal production of *auteurs*) and the creation of an avant-garde tradition of personal films made by obsessive individual stylists independent of their historical and political contexts. Parallel to the move of the School of Paris to New York, this tradition consisted of the primarily European directors of the prewar years and the postwar American independents.<sup>7</sup>

Recognition of this historical continuity supplied a justifying context for Brakhage's work on two levels. It allowed him to see his own stylistic practice as traditional, a continuation of techniques that could be identified as characteristic of a film practice alternative to that in use in the dominant cinema, a way out of the necessity of conforming to the formal codes of Hollywood realism. "My big problem has been, all these years, that no one has recognized that I (and all my contemporaries) are working in a lineal tradition of Méliès, Griffith, Dreyer, Eisenstein, and all the other classically accepted filmmakers. . . . I took my first cues for fast cuts from Eisenstein, and I took my first sense of parallel cutting from Griffith, and I took my first sense of the individual frame life of a film from Méliès, and so on."<sup>8</sup>

And it allowed him to see his own use of the medium for interior investigation as similarly traditional and in fact identifiable as its true one. Hence *Film Biographies* presents the directors admitted into the canon as using film to come to grips with psychic trauma; each is engaged not with a historical situation or with a social function, but rather with some kind of demon, frequently of a psychosexual origin: Méliès as a magician trying to find a heroine who will restore his psyche shattered by pre-natal trauma; Griffith fulfilling his destiny to right all wrongs under the mental guidance of his sister Mattie; Dreyer searching out "the demon-of-himself"; and even Eisenstein fighting the animal that had ravaged his personal being in the womb.

Since Brakhage's reading of this tradition so completely suppressed any concern with the means of production (except in so far that studio mechanisms or other bureaucratic controls were seen to inhibit the creative genius of the film-maker), it could supply a lineage for his own stylistic practice but not a model of how a contemporary film-maker, seeking to investigate his own psyche, could find a social situation that would allow such an investigation. What the underground (including Brakhage) developed for distribution and consumption—the co-op system and the practice of personal showings before small groups, which had more in common with a poetry reading than with the situation in which mass film was consumed—may in its earliest stages have seemed like an attempt to confront Hollywood or compete with it, but eventually became simply an alternative. As such, it was thoroughly compatible with the way in which Brakhage was simultaneously theorizing his production methods and the overall function and value of his work. These latter may be summarized by reference to the assumption of total responsibility by the artist over all stages of production and the concomitant rejection of Hollywood as entirely other. Personal attention to all the mechanics of production followed from his notion of film-making as a vocation, as a way of life rather than as work. According to one of his favorite puns, Brakhage was an amateur, one who did it for love. Rejecting alienated labor and accepting an economically peripheral position, he thought of film not as a means of sustaining life, but coextensive with life itself. Two important implications followed:

work in the medium acquired an overwhelming centrality within the life processes, and subject matter became that of the biology and metaphysics of life itself—"birth, sex, death, and the search for God"<sup>9</sup>—and its parameters rarely extended beyond the family. In the blindest rejection of the industry, art film became home movies.

This being so, Hollywood did not appear as a competitor or a threat except in so far as it assumed the status of a hegemonic system, co-extensive in the public mind with the definition of the medium itself. As far as the practice of film was concerned, it was not so much to be challenged as regarded as an entirely separate enterprise: "If I had needed to show them 'sights' [rather than 'sharing a sight with them'] then presumably I'd have gone to Hollywood."<sup>10</sup> Behind this there is of course an implicit value judgment (art vs. entertainment) which can appear as the chronological component in a theory of the avant-garde itself by which artists, the "antennae of the race," are always ahead of popular consciousness. This however was mostly thought of in stylistic terms, by which technical innovations in the underground eventually surfaced in Hollywood, though the interruptive flash frame is about the only instance Brakhage can ever cite. Since working with or in the industry was theoretically inappropriate as well as practically infeasible (RKO's difficulty with Welles and the initial financial failure of *Citizen Kane* having effectively closed the door on independent directors in Hollywood until the success of such films as *Easy Rider* proved the possibility of tapping the counter culture itself and so opened the doors for the New Hollywood) the only alternative was to polarize methods of production with the result that in Brakhage's case film-making became literally a cottage industry.

Parallel to his rejection of the form of the feature and of Hollywood-style production, Brakhage evolved a radically original attitude to the technology of the medium. Rather than attempting to imitate the effects of commercial film, his essential gesture was to minimize his technology and at the same time to exploit as fully as possible the complete resources of what he retained. Unlike Jon Jost, for example, and other independents in the seventies, Brakhage had no political awareness of the technology of the medium but neither did he promote

scrutiny of it to a position of centrality as did some of the Structuralists. Instead his thrust was to organicize it, to bring to it a flexibility by which it could approach the suppleness of the human eye at the same time that it extended the eye. The minimization of technology took the form of an initial reliance on 16mm and shooting in natural light situations (both of which he shared with the American documentary movement initiated by *Primary*) and eventually the use of 8mm, Super-8 and the pocket camera. The extension of the resources of the camera entailed rejecting the reproduction of post-Renaissance models of perception by attempting to escape the limitations of lenses ground according to the primacy of such models; hence the use of distorting lenses, pieces of colored glass, etc. (especially in *Dog Star Man*) and the use of the full range of aperture, focus, and camera speed, considering these as variables to be manipulated according to present expressive needs rather than as a means to ensuring "correct" exposure, etc.

Editing was similarly liberated, most notoriously in *Mothlight* with the use of natural materials, but more generally by shooting in double-sprocketed 16, thereby allowing a given shot to be incorporated in four different ways; by using black leader and flash frames of solid color; by using the splice bar as an item in the vocabulary; and by scratching, painting, dyeing, baking film and by allowing it to mold. Brakhage's only limitation was the requirement that the finished film be projectable; otherwise the attempt to defetishize technology and to subvert the repressive technical standards of the commercial film were phrased as the attempt to exploit the total resources of the medium: "There is a vast area of any art where the grammar of that art and its technique are interrelated and even synonymous (in the sense of: to be taken for granted); and one of the definitions of any medium could, and perhaps *ought*, to be in terms of the technical limitations of that medium."<sup>11</sup>

The ideal of an anti-technological, organically human cinema, alternative but not oppositional to Hollywood, was lived by Brakhage in his retreat from the city to a nineteenth-century log cabin in the Colorado wilderness, where with his family he could be most free from the dominant categories of modern urban life, free to re-create the Romantic problematic. His discovery of a tradition, his evolution

of a method of production and his choice of a social and geographical situation necessary to the formulation of the role of film artist determined the limits of his style and subject matter. That situation, prefigured 150 years before in, for example, Wordsworth's retreat to Grasmere with his sister and Coleridge, ensured that the parameters of his aesthetic would remain within the general terms of Romanticism. The fullness of his elaboration of a film aesthetic within those terms accounts for the achievement of his mature work and also for its inevitable limitations. The coincidence between this Wordsworthian situation and the poetry of Charles Olson, however, can be more precisely specified.

The polemical center of Olson's thought is what he called "objectism:" "the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects."<sup>12</sup> As an aesthetic and the basis of an epistemology, objectism implies both a stylistic practice and a situation of the self in respect to nature, the later of which Charles Altieri has defined by distinguishing between two movements within the Romantic tradition. The former, typified by Coleridge's "meditations on poetic structure and on the mind's dialectical pursuit of an ideal represents an essentially symbolist model that reaches its fruition in Eliot, Yeats and some Stevens and then narrows into the academic art of the second-generation New Critics."<sup>13</sup> The alternative model, represented by Wordsworth and which produces post-modernist poetry, is "an essentially *immanentist* vision of the role of poetry. Here poetic creation is conceived more as the discovery and the disclosure of numinous relationships within nature than as the creation of containing and structuring forms. Hence its basic commitment is to recovering familiar realities in such a way that they appear dynamically present and invigorate the mind with a sense of powers and objective values available to it" (*ibid*).

In Olson this immanentist vision produces a method of constructing poetry which foregoes ordering reality by means of large mental structures (such as myths) to satisfy the desolate modern ego and instead eliminates that

ego in an attempted direct contact between consciousness and nature; the poetry becomes an articulation of that contact as well as a means to it. Hence form becomes organic, a function of content to be discovered in experience itself ("Form is never more than an extension of content"). Rejection of both ideas and the intending role of the humanist ego ("Art does not seek to describe but to enact"), theoretically allows the poet to go beyond the imagination to direct perception, to that place where consciousness and nature are in perpetual interchange. Hence in a successful poem, "one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception."<sup>14</sup> Finally, since the ego is by-passed, the significant drama is displaced into the body, resulting in the biological imperative of Olson's emphasis on the breath rather than the line as the primary unit of composition.

While Brakhage himself constantly reiterated the importance of Olson's thought for him in the sixties,<sup>15</sup> it seems to me that that importance was largely a matter of finding a way of theorizing what he already understood as his essential concerns, which I construe as an attempt to circumvent ideology and experience physical vision in an intense, sophisticated and complete way. Olson's stress on immediate perception and on the poem's continuous self-generation out of its present are nodes around which Brakhage's own theories and the details of the style he created during the sixties fall into place: his total and physical involvement in the shooting process, the visual presence and energy of his films and his instigation of the camera as an extension of the eye all cohere at this point. Even an early and apparently modernist reversion to myth like *Dog Star Man* is incorporated in it. For the modernist use of myth, summarized by Eliot's recognition in "Ulysses, Order and Myth" that Joyce inaugurated the possibility of "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity," thereby providing "a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history," is conspicuously absent. Though Brakhage has asserted the importance of the "mythic" image of the tree on the Cretan coin, claims for the mythic structure of the film rest finally on its "archetypal" images and on the film's observance of the cyclicity of the sea-

sons. To the extent that the woodcutter's quest is universalized it is so by being naturalized back into Brakhage's immediate environment and perceptions, rather than articulated against a narrative line drawn from antiquity.

Similarly Sitney's analysis of the three aspects of Brakhage's vision—open eye sight, "brain movies," and "closed-eye vision"<sup>16</sup>—finally designate points within the interchange between consciousness and nature rather than categorically distinct areas of inquiry. That analysis is however useful in drawing attention to variations in the relative roles of the imagination and the external world in the overall phenomenology. Though the possibility of seeing both "from the inside out and the outside in"<sup>17</sup> remains, in general there was a general shift through the sixties by which the point of origin of vision is relocated from the imagination to the impingement of the outside world on sight, producing consequently a heavier emphasis on the eyes themselves. That shift may be seen by the juxtaposition of the two following remarks, the first from 1963 and the second from 1972:

OF NECESSITY I BECOME INSTRUMENT FOR THE PASSAGE OF INNER VISION, THRU ALL MY SENSIBILITIES, INTO ITS EXTERNAL FORM. My most active part in this process is to increase all my sensibilities (so that all films arise out of some total area of being or full life) AND, at the given moment of possible creation to act only out of necessity.<sup>18</sup>

I am the most thorough documentary film maker in the world because I document the act of seeing as well as everything that the light brings me. . . . I have added nothing. I've just been trying to see and make a place for my seeing in the world at large.<sup>19</sup>

The first, itself a development from a previous preoccupation with his own ego as potentially the source of "universal concern"<sup>20</sup> repeats Olson's emphasis on attentiveness and on biological urgency as the motor of composition, but still retains the notion of the artist as conduit for perception whose origin is so far behind consciousness that it dissolves into the divine. Brakhage continues to invoke this unknowable source, frequently designating it as "the Muses," but by the early seventies those Muses, if not exactly located in the perceptual organs themselves, are at least essentially discernible there. Thus Brakhage is more and more inclined to refer to the peculiarities of his own eyesight, both in respect to the phosphenes

which create closed eye vision and to the open-eyed perception of, for example, the streaks of light in the sky before rain or the glow with which certain material objects present themselves to him. (At his most extreme, Brakhage will even hypothesize light itself as an ontological absolute, invoking at such times Pound's reference to Erigena's dictum, "Omnia quae sunt, lumina sunt,"—all that is, is light.) In this sense he becomes not so much the fabricator of correlatives to experience but the documentarist of the impingement of the external world on his field of vision.

The rejection of the ego as the agent of vision accounts for what otherwise might appear as an unresolved tension between, on the one hand, the aggressive idiosyncrasy of Brakhage's style and his habitual and similarly aggressive inscription of himself on his work by the signature scratched into the emulsion and, on the other, the rhetoric of his disengagement from the completed work. Typically Brakhage claims that once a work is complete, he is no more authoritative about it than anyone else; he is reluctant to speak of *his* films, certainly of his *own* films, and prefers locations like "what was given to me to see." However ingenuous this may be, the claim is a logical implication of the documentarist aesthetic which defines the individual eye as the location of vision and de-emphasizes the imagination as its origin. This in turn allows for the supposed social utility of Brakhage's work, for while he can present himself as merely the vehicle of his vision, the courage of reproducing it is of vital importance in the mechanism of encouraging others similarly to see for themselves and in so doing rediscover themselves: "To put it simply: in the name of 'progress' an *extensive* view of human personality has been almost destroyed as a possibility of consideration for most people. There's really no problem in seeing that the same man who made *Anticipation of the Night*, then made *Dog Star Man*, then made *Scenes From Under Childhood*, and is now doing the films that I'm doing. There's really no problem with that at all, because you have one absolute surety to go on, and that's *style*. I had thought to emphasize that by *signing* those works. It takes me hours to scratch on film: By Brakhage."<sup>21</sup>

The centrality of style, both as the locus of continuity in the oeuvre and as the significant feature of any given film, accounts for Brak-

hage's amazing prolificness, for once a mechanism for reproducing vision has been secured, then its product is as extensive as seeing itself; all Brakhage films are finally excerpts from the grand film which has rolled before his eyes since birth. It also accounts for the aridity of "new critical" interpretations of given films; it is not simply that the experience of Brakhage's films is so completely visual and hence resistant to verbal description or summary, but also what is finally at issue is the style itself, not what it can produce or reproduce. A Brakhage film is the occasion for the practice of a determinate style.

Brakhage's move towards the position of being a documentarist of what was given him to see coincided with a change in his production methods. In his earlier position, still inflected towards the modernist creative artist, production was bi-partite, involving shooting and editing in relatively equal proportions. While shooting did involve acute attentiveness and relied on biological urgency for decision making, it could be conceived of as the collection of material preparatory to editing where the same motivating imperatives would have to declare themselves. Hence the elaborate editorial processes, involving in *Dog Star Man*, for example, the collation of up to four synchronous rolls and all the painting, scratching, etc., on the exposed film. Though the *Songs* often contain similar work on the exposed film, in general the move to 8 mm coincided with an increasing reliance on shooting alone, such that by the late sixties Brakhage's control over the camera and especially over single-framing was so supple that the editing process became largely a matter of selection. Thus, for example, *The Text of Light* (1974) is edited in that the separate shots are strung together, but the film is conspicuous not only for its interest in light itself even to the extent of abandoning a literal image, but also for the absence of elaborate cutting within the shot and of similar extensive work on the film itself. To describe it Brakhage preferred to use the word "arranged" or "composed" rather than "edited": "There is an energy in the amount of shooting which editing again can leak out for you. What's interesting to me is the energy of immediacy. That comes out of my involvement with Charles Olson. . . . Editing is always an afterthought."<sup>22</sup> At such points, where the camera most closely approaches the condition

of an extension of the eye (and in fact in *The Text of Light* the relationship between the camera and the ashtray metaphorically and functionally reproduces the usual relationship between the eye and the camera), awareness of the means of reproduction is de-emphasized and so the divorce between Brakhage and the structuralists becomes pronounced.

To the extent that Brakhage's work approached the absolute sensuality of the documentation of organic perceptual processes—to the extent that it became immanentist—it involved a corresponding diminution of interest in and capacity for conceptual articulation. The attempt to escape the ordering of the ego produced a style that while singularly flexible in its own sphere of operation inhibited the ability of his work to approach issues that could not be handled in sensual terms. Thus, when Brakhage is faced with social phenomena, issues that could only with extreme difficulty be reduced back into his own body or re-enacted as domestic drama, the limitations of his entire aesthetic declare themselves. Even such a celebrated excursion into the public world as the *Pittsburg Trilogy* can finally do no more than approach its subjects as packages of sensory data. Hence it becomes possible to read Brakhage's style politically in such a way that the disengagement from public life involved in the retreat from present society to the nineteenth century domesticity of the backwoods becomes a concomitant of it rather than incidental to it. Such a retreat is of course itself a political act, and one which had considerable currency in the sixties when various counter-culture ideologies valorized the rejection of the social machinery of capitalism as a means of social renewal. For various reasons the idealism of such gestures was not readily apparent in the period, and it is inconceivable that the deficiencies of Brakhage's Romantic individualism could in any way have been modified without upsetting the entire theoretical premise of his art. It will be useful to conclude therefore with two instances where Brakhage's technique proved itself incapable of accommodating public matters, one where the outside world penetrated the mountain retreat and one where Brakhage attempted to venture into the heart of the beast.

The fragility and ultimate untenability of social disengagement became most forcefully apparent in respect to the war in Vietnam, and



the film Brakhage made about his response to it, *The Twenty Third Psalm Branch*, the longest of the *Songs*, both displays and dramatizes the point beyond which his aesthetic could not go. The means of entry of the outside world was the TV, itself used in the Brakhage family as a surrogate for "going out in the evening."<sup>23</sup> The reports of the war precipitated domestic quarrels of unprecedented severity and bombarded Brakhage with guilt: "I couldn't deal with the television set. And it wasn't just the object itself, but that it was our only specific connection to Society with a capital S or something we were expected to be responsible for" (p. 109). Rather than confront the specific connection or even the images themselves, Brakhage adopted a series of strategies by which the historical specificity of this event could be displaced.

First the Vietnam war was replaced by footage from World War II, a war which Brakhage had known as a child from movie newsreels. While this allowed for the contrast between the personally shot domestic scenes and the alienness of war (and so supplied the film's primary strategy of attempting to incorporate that alienness into his own vision by painting, overlaying with benday dots, etc.) nevertheless this remains a mark of the limitations of the immanentist practice, its inability to confront whatever is not phenomenally present to immediate vision. The war that is approached is a constituent, not of contemporary social reality, but of private consciousness, of memory. This displacement was entirely consistent with Brakhage's essentialist attitude to war, which saw it as a natural disaster, an act of God like "hurricanes and tornadoes and droughts and floods" (*ibid.*, p. 116), yet with its final source in human consciousness. Hence the interest in the crowd formations in fascist Europe; public behavior as the manifestation of a "war state of mind." But even on these terms the film is able neither to complete itself, nor to face the implications of that failure.

First Brakhage is reduced to words and the quotation from Zukovsky, "Song, my song, raise my grief to music," indicates his uncertainty that this elevation could be achieved by nonverbal means without recourse to what he had eschewed in rejecting drama and the sound film. Subsequently he attempts to incorporate this limit into the film itself, first by photographing himself writing a "Dear Jane" letter,

formulating a more precise interpretation of his state of mind than can be reproduced visually: "I must stop. The War *is* as thoughts/patterns are—as endless as . . . precise as eye's hell *is!*", and by scratching "I can't go on." What is here presented as a psychological limit is at the same time a limit of his aesthetic, produced simultaneously by his inability to confront the war on terms other than his own experience of it and by his inability to recreate it within the terms of his art. But instead of accepting the disclosure, which would oblige him to end the film at this point, leaving it "aesthetically" incomplete and, on its own terms, incompletionable, he does go on and so avoids the impasse. He retreats once again into private experience, domestic scenes with the Kubelkas in Vienna, Austrian artists, an homage to Freud, and finally a return to his family in Colorado.

While *23rd Psalm Branch* indicates the inability of Brakhage's style and the Romantic aesthetics behind it to transcend privatized individual consciousness to engage in public issues, it nevertheless simultaneously fulfills itself by erecting itself as an alternative to the horror of contemporary political life, presenting itself as the location of values—esthetic values—public espousal of which, it is implied, would eventually lead to amelioration of the public realm. Hence his apparent approval, in the talks he gave at this period, of Ginsberg's ostrich-like gesture of personally declaring, in 1966, the war over. In the western tradition, the comprehensive term for these values is "beauty," and it is appropriate to end with reference to one of Brakhage's most beautiful films and an event in his life which dramatically illustrates the conditions of avoidance under which that beauty could be secured. The whole event has the quality of an allegory.

Early in 1973, Brakhage renewed the acquaintance of an old school-friend who had become a millionaire and decided to make a portrait of him. He went to his friend's office in Denver with a new macro lens, which failed to work as expected. In despair Brakhage gave up shooting and the camera, with its bellows in the middle, sagged. Before he picked the camera up, he looked through the lens:

. . . and I saw a whole forest-like scene! And I said, how incredible! and I looked to see what it was pointing to, and it was pointing to his ashtray. Then I brought him around the desk

and I said, look, see what I find, and he looked and said, how wonderful! and so on.

And I looked again . . . and it had changed.

And a little stream was wandering through it! And this is how the film began.<sup>24</sup>

And so *The Text of Light* was discovered, a visual odyssey, almost entirely abstract and laboriously shot frame-by-frame over a period of months, resulting in a back injury so severe that it caused Brakhage to walk with a stick. The confrontation with capitalism, even in its most personal form, was avoided—but ecstasy was snatched from a millionaire's ashtray.

## NOTES

1. 1. "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler. Chairman, Willard Maas. Organized by Amos Vogel," in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader* (New York: Praeger, 1970), pp. 171-87.
2. *Visionary Film*, p. ix.
3. For a convenient selection of Yale School work on Romanticism, see Harold Bloom, ed., *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Norton, 1970).
4. Inevitably I have simplified both the social changes of this period and the materialist approach to its poetics. Work in this area is still at an early stage, but the following are useful: Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (New York: International Publishers, 1937) ch. v; Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art* (New York: Vintage, 1951), vol. iii; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958) and *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1976).
5. "The Experimental Film in America," *Film Culture* No. 3., rpt. *Film Culture Reader*, p. 22.
6. Since these intrusions were typically intradiegetic (e.g., the cat and the roses in *Cat's Cradle* or the boiling water in *Way To Shadow Garden*), it is in fact more accurate to speak of them as metonymy used as metaphor.

7. The most ambitious form of this undertaking came to fruition in the mid-seventies with the establishment of Anthology Film Archives' collection of "The Essential Cinema," which was "philosophically oriented toward the pure film. . . . The curriculum it proposes constitutes a film history for a student and aspiring filmmaker who wants to know the medium as an aesthetic endeavor." P. Adams Sitney, Introduction to *The Essential Cinema: Essays on Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives*, (New York: New York University Press, 1974), p. xi.
8. Interview with Hollis Frampton, *Artforum*, Jan. 1973, p. 76.
9. *Metaphors on Vision*, rpt. in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 121.
10. Frampton interview, p. 79.
11. *A Moving Picture Giving and Taking Book* (West Newbury, Mass.: Frontier Press, 1971), p. 25.
12. "Projective Verse," 1950, rpt. in Robert Creeley ed., *Charles Olson: Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 24.
13. Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 60's* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979), p. 17. The rubric from Denise Levertov is quoted from Altieri's magnificent book.
14. These quotations from Olson are from "Projective Verse," except "Art does not seek to describe . . ." which is from "Human Universe."
15. See also the letter to Jane after his first meeting with Olson in 1963, rpt. in *Film Culture Reader*, pp. 250-57.
16. Introduction to *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism* (New York: New York University Press, 1978) pp. xxvii-xxviii.
17. Interview with P. Adams Sitney, rpt. in *Film Culture Reader*, p. 239.
19. Frampton interview, p. 79.
20. Sitney interview, p. 229.
21. Frampton interview, p. 75.
22. *The Seen* (San Francisco: Zephyrus Image, 1975), n.p.
23. "Stan Brakhage Speaks on '23rd Psalm Branch' at Filmmakers Cinematheque, April 22, 1967," *Film Culture*, Nos. 67,8,9 (1979), p. 109.
24. "Stan Brakhage: The Text of Light," *Cantrill Film-notes*, 21/22, p. 36.

# Reviews

## REDS

Director and producer: Warren Beatty. Script: Beatty and Trevor Griffiths. Photography: Vittorio Storaro. Editing: Dede Allen and Craig McKay. Production design: Richard Sylbert. Music: Stephen Sondheim. Paramount.

*Reds* is cinematically pre-revolutionary; Eisenstein, as a friend remarked, would have hated it. What makes *Reds* appealing, despite its shortcomings, lies in its treatment of the relationship between romance and revolution.

Those who see *Reds* as the result of Beatty's shrewd calculations argue that he has neutralized the political force of John Reed's story in order to sell it as a love story. But to interpret Beatty's intentions in these terms is to assume that a love story cannot be serious or radical. *Reds* may not succeed finally in shattering that assumption, but it certainly calls it into question. If we look closely at the film's treatment of the Reed-Bryant affair, I think it becomes